

ARIZONA PATHWAYS

In February of 2011 the Harvard Graduate School of Education released a report entitled Pathways to Prosperity: Meeting the Challenge of Preparing Young Americans for the 21st Century. The report had its roots in several states where business and industry leaders were expressing concerns about the ability of the current educational system to meet the talent needs of their organizations. The report does not suggest an educational “program” but rather concludes three cultural changes to the educational system in America. Those conclusions include:

1. The current system of education places too much emphasis on a single pathway: attending and graduating from a four-year college after completing an academic program of study in high school. It is long past time that we broaden the range of high quality pathways for young people to achieve economic independence.
2. In an effort to construct a more effective network of pathways to prosperity it will require a sea change in the role of business and other employers
3. Revisit the social contract between youth and society that insures by the time they reach their early 20's they are equipped with the education and experience needed to lead a successful life as an adult including having cleared the initial but essential hurdle of graduating from high school.

In March of 2013 Harvard facilitated a national Pathways conference. The conference was convened in response to the national discussion ignited by the report in fully two thirds of the states from every region of the country. The response was powerful proof of a growing national desire to address the challenges identified in the report of our failure to prepare millions of young Americans to lead successful lives as adults. Arizona sent 16 individuals to the conference including the State Superintendent, various non-profits, representatives from business and leaders of educational reform efforts in our state. Our state team perhaps the largest state delegation in attendance indicates that the findings in this report rang true with those involved in improving our states education system in a way that insure more of our young people achieve success defined at least in part as financial independence.

Within a few weeks of returning from the conference the team met again with the purpose of determining how what we heard at the conference fits into the current tapestry of initiatives in our state to improve our educational system, identify the key learning's from the conference and thoughts about the path forward. There is a sense of urgency around this issue both in Arizona and in our country as the undeniable link between the quality of our education system and the vitality of our economy is so abundantly clear. Listed below are the key outcomes from this meeting that will serve as the initial issues and action steps to achieve the three conclusions of the Pathways report in Arizona.

It is critical that the Pathway effort not be another “program” to improve educational outcomes in our state. We have in place already a number of initiatives underway to do just that so it becomes important very early on to catalog those efforts and how the pathways outcomes can be integrated into those current initiatives. Where gaps exist in the achieving the pathways conclusions for instance enhanced business involvement the existing initiatives will have to be supplemented.

There are some critical definition issues that need to be agreed upon. For instance college ready still means to many a baccalaureate degree. The definition of college needs to be adjusted to include community college, technical schools, and other forms of postsecondary achievement like potentially

apprenticeship programs, etc. Failure to make this change tends to continue to reinforce the predominant single pathway available to our young people as described in the report. Another, fundamental definitional challenge is the words educational success. For us we believe that the best indicator of success for the educational system is that those who participate in it have economic independence. There are clearly several viable educational pathways to achieving that definition of success in addition to the traditional pathway described in the report.

A foundational initiative to any college and career ready educational system is that all students have the opportunity to participate in a career awareness and exploration program prior to entering the ninth grade. This program would identify the broad range of careers available, the knowledge, skills and behaviors necessary for success in those careers, common levels of compensation, level of education required for entry and educational institutions of all types in Arizona where those requirements could be obtained. The student would leave eighth grade with an Individual Career Plan for their high school experience and beyond. Arizona has some excellent models for these that simply have to be brought to scale so all students have access to them. The career plan would be flexible and updated as the individual chooses to change their career decision.

Currently viewed less valued pathways like Career and Technical Education(CTE) must be viewed as equally valued to the university path and recognized by all stakeholders as pathways to economic independence. Changing these strongly held traditional definitions will take an extensive fact based communication plan to all the stakeholders including parents, students, business, government policy makers, educators, etc. and may constitute the single biggest obstacle to improving the educational success of all students.

What gets measured gets done and the State must identify a few definitive measures of educational success to measure the performance of Arizona's educational system including providing multiple pathways to individual success. This must be done carefully and with great thought as the measurements will drive behaviors in the system and if not done well could be as damaging as they are helpful.

We must insist that each pathway provides for outcomes that normed with very best in the world as Arizona students as there are few careers that will not be impacted by the reality that we exist in a global economy. Specifically the CTE education pathway while good in Arizona must have quality metrics identified and audited. Those programs that do not measure up must be placed on timely improvement plans that if not achieved reduce or eliminate state and federal support for those programs.

It is hard to move a mountain in a single effort in fact it is probably a formula for failure. However, rock by rock over time a mountain can be moved. It is our teams believe that we have to get quickly on with moving the most significant rocks that will move the mountain called Arizona's education system. To that end for the Career and Technical Education pathway we need to incubate and experiment with best practices to improve the quality of the CTE pathway and then bring those best practices to scale. Frankly, we have to become more nimble at change in education as our students deserve it and the economic vitality of our state and nation depend upon it.

The applied learning method associated with the delivery of quality CTE programs must be rapidly applied to all of education. If for no other reason students who cannot see any application for what they are being asked to learn tend to vote with their feet and dropout. In addition most students learn

best when they can see clear application of the content. A critical question of any educational content that should be asked is: what is the application of what I am asking these students to learn. If one cannot be found then a logical response is it should not be taught. Related to this issue is the awarding of academic credit for academic content gained through non-academic courses including CTE courses and programs. Barriers to accomplishing this need to be removed and perhaps most importantly a rigorous process for determining where this occurs must be identified and applied at the state level.

As daunting as changes to the educational system may be achieving the conclusion on enhancing business and industry participation in education is equally difficult. In America business and industry has largely been passive participants and with some notable exceptions not fully engaging the issue in a positive way. Business not only has to speak loudly on the skills young people need for success but also provide work based interns for students and for educators to insure alignment between the educational experience and the world of work. All students in Arizona should have a work based experience prior to graduation and that would require the full engagement of the state's business community.

Arizona remains a largely rural state and that represents unique challenges to implementation of the pathway recommendations. Every initiative must include a discussion of how the issue can be optimized in our rural and in some cases remote schools.

Finally, the 'invented here' syndrome must be avoided. There are states, schools, business, communities who have found ways of doing all the above. Arizona needs to find those examples, tweak them as necessary and grow them to scale. At the very least to do otherwise is poor use of limited resources and some would say just plain stupid.